

A Great Egret stands in profile, facing right, against a clear blue sky. The bird has a long, sharp beak and a long, slender neck. Its feathers are a mix of light and dark grey. In the foreground, there are some dry, brownish reeds or grasses.

The St. Johns River

**nominated as an
American Heritage
River**

Section One

Description of the Proposed American Heritage River Area

The St. Johns River, 310 miles in length, is the longest river in Florida and one of the most unique in the United States. Among its many distinct characteristics, the St. Johns River is one of only three rivers in the nation that flows north. It is difficult for people to grasp the magnitude of this river. The St. Johns River and its tributaries drain about 1/6 of the state of Florida or about 8,700 square miles. The area is larger than six states.

The St. Johns begins as a broad marsh at its headwaters southwest of Cape Canaveral, evolving into a series of lakes (Harney, Jesup, Monroe and George) interconnected as the river broadens and flows east and north of Orlando. Hence, its original name among Native Americans was Welaka, or River of Lakes. The St. Johns is fed by a number of springs including Florida's largest - Silver Springs.

At Palatka, the St. Johns matures into its true size and shape, averaging two miles in width for its final one hundred mile journey through Florida's largest city, Jacksonville, where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean.

From headwaters to mouth it drops in altitude by only 30 feet, about one inch per mile, making it one of the laziest rivers in the world. That feature is both a blessing and a curse. Wildlife is abundant, from bald eagles and blue herons to the endangered manatee. In mid-river, large mouth bass are abundant. And as it flows north, the final 20 miles creates a unique ecosystem as salt water from the Atlantic mixes with fresh, creating estuaries for shrimp and oysters. Indeed, office workers from Jacksonville's downtown skyscrapers often see dolphins cavorting 20 miles inland from the river's mouth. The curse: as such a slow-flowing river the flushing of pollutants is hindered, requiring a greater commitment of care and resources to protect it.

The unique nature of the St. Johns is enhanced because it breathes life, recreation, and an economic infusion into scores of villages, towns and cities along its way. Commercial and sport fishing abounds. Rich topsoil along its route allows farms and forests to flourish. Hiking trails find a vista at every turn, a picnic site at every bend. As Florida's first highway, river transportation was the genesis of north Florida's economic life, from the canoes of Native Americans hundreds of years ago, to the sailing ships of the Spanish, French and English from the 1500s to the 1700s, the paddle-wheel steamboats of the 1800s, to



the sailboats and recreation craft of today. And as the millennium winds to an end, on the grandest scale, it is home to one of the largest deepwater ports on the Atlantic, importing and exporting millions of tons of cargo annually, and is home to the second largest Atlantic fleet of the United States Navy, finding its niche as home to the keepers of our national security.

On the basis of its unique features, history, culture, environment, economy, population and lifeblood to Florida and the United States, the City of Jacksonville along with neighboring counties and cities proudly nominates in its entirety, the St. Johns River for designation as an American Heritage River.